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Citation for final published version:

Badmington, Neil ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6552-6618> 2015. Very fine gifts: an interview with Chris Turner. *Barthes Studies* 1 (1) , pp. 158-164. file

Publishers page: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/article/very-fi...>
<<http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/article/very-fine-gifts-an-interview-with-chris-turner/>>

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Very Fine Gifts: An Interview with Chris Turner

Neil Badmington

This interview was conducted in October 2015 to mark the publication of Chris Turner's five volumes of new Barthes translations for Seagull Books.

Neil Badmington: Before we turn to Barthes, perhaps we could set the scene by talking a little about you. How did you come to be a translator?

Chris Turner: I studied French and German at Cambridge in the mid-seventies and went on to do a D. Phil. in French Studies at Sussex. In that period, I spent a lot of time in France, including a year in Clermont-Ferrand and another at the École normale supérieure de Saint-Cloud near Paris. As I was finishing the doctorate, which I happened to do in Birmingham, an opportunity arose to revise the translation of the first volume of Klaus Theweleit's *Männerphantasien* for Minnesota University Press with Erica Carter, who is now Professor of German at King's London. We went on to translate the second volume and, building on that, founded a translation cooperative called Material Word, where I was largely in charge of the French side of things. Quite long-term relationships were formed with some fascinating authors, particularly with Jean Baudrillard and André Gorz, relationships which outlived the co-operative and, in the two cases mentioned, lasted until their deaths. It was my plan also to write, but the demands on my time as a translator rather quickly squeezed out other activities.

NB: The publication by Seagull Books of your five new volumes of Barthes translations is a major development in the anglophone reception and understanding of his work. How did the whole project come about?

CT: I should point out that with most of the publishers I've worked with in the past I wouldn't have been able to answer that question, but with Seagull I've played quite an active role in developing the French list. A little unusually, this Barthes project was largely initiated by Éditions du Seuil in Paris. Seuil regularly send us their catalogues and I

think I'd suggested to Naveen Kishore, who runs Seagull, that we bid for some of the Barthes seminars. We didn't get those, but Seuil rather enterprisingly came back to us with an inventory of Barthes texts from the *Œuvres complètes* for which translation rights were available.

NB: How were the contents of each volume chosen? Did you make the decisions, or did the publisher come to you with a list of what was to be included? And was it simply a matter of selecting pieces from the *Œuvres complètes* which had not been translated into English?

CT: We were provided with a long list, but it was a strange photocopied document with many items crossed out and others highlighted in various colours. For reasons best known to the French publishers, it seemed to have related in some way, before it had been modified, to a similar edition of Barthes texts produced by a Portuguese or Brazilian publisher. I think it represents my only professional encounter with a palimpsest.

From that list of available items I made the final selections and, while largely following the division into volumes that had presumably been established by the phantom lusophones, I tweaked things a bit, creating an extra volume – I think it was the one consisting entirely of longer interviews – and moving one or two items that seemed to have been wrongly classified, though I'm happy to concede that the final division into volumes was a little arbitrary at times. There was one further change I'd have like to have made, but I proposed this too late, after the grant application had been approved by the French government, and I was told that no further changes were possible.

The list also made a distinction between items that were definitely available and others that might be. I steered clear of the latter category entirely, except for one tentative request that came to nothing. In one case, I queried whether the rights to the piece really lay with Éditions du Seuil, but I got a very dusty answer – Naveen forwarded me an email which, as I recall, read: 'Tell Chris Turner we are not pirates', which was quite amusing. I only remember one piece that was offered to us which we didn't take and that was a long essay on Jean Cayrol, whom I judged to be too little known in the English-speaking world. There may have been others but I don't recall any.

My main aim in the whole exercise was to ensure that each of the volumes would be a worthwhile book on its own account. Looking back, I think Barthes's voice actually makes this the case and I may have been worrying unnecessarily about that aspect, but it's one of the

reasons I insisted on writing a short contextualizing introduction for each of the pieces.

NB: Those introductions do a wonderful job: there's a lot of cultural and historical context surrounding some of the pieces, particularly the earlier ones, it seems to me, which wouldn't necessarily be apparent to modern anglophone readers. The list of authors whose work you've translated is quite something. You've already mentioned Baudrillard and Gorz, but we could add Balibar, Lacoue-Labarthe, Virilio, Sartre, Bourdieu, Quignard, Augé, Clément, and many others. Is this the first time that you've translated Barthes?

CT: Strictly speaking, it isn't. As a student, I was enthusiastic about Barthes and one of my university teachers, who later became Draper's Professor of French, tried to persuade me I was being led astray by the seductiveness of his style. Basically, he challenged me to translate some passages into English and see how the coherence of the text disintegrated. So, rather grumpily, I did and, very happily, it didn't.

Having said that, this is the first time I've worked on Barthes professionally, unless you count some passages that came up in a text I translated for the office of the French cultural attaché in London several years back.

Translating Barthes for me has been a little bit like translating Sartre, Gorz or Balibar, in that they're all authors I grew up with, so to speak. Sartre represents my A-levels and incipient atheism, Balibar my youthful Althusserianism, and Gorz a later eco-socialism. These were all authors whose books I read as and when they came out. Similarly, with Barthes, as a first year student at Cambridge, I devoured *Mythologies*, *Le degré zero* etc. and then seized on everything else as soon as I could get my hands on it. I remember a conversation with Lloyd Austin, the Professor of French, who found me reading the latest Barthes shortly after it had reached Heffers bookshop in Cambridge. He'd obviously sized me up quite well, because he immediately talked about how, as a young man in Paris, he'd joined queues of students at bookshops waiting for the latest Paul Valéry. I still remember him saying that every second young intellectual you met in Paris in those days introduced himself as a 'poet', whereas nowadays you couldn't move for 'philosophers'. I've always found that a useful bit of historical perspective...

NB: Does translating Barthes into English pose any specific problems? Is there anything particular about his French, for instance, which creates a

challenge that you perhaps haven't encountered in your other work? You mention the well-known difficulty of '*jouissance*' in a footnote in '*A Very Fine Gift*', for instance, and you make a persuasive case for sticking with the often-criticized 'bliss', but I'm thinking more generally than that.

CT: Some of the language that arose out of the introduction of linguistics into literary theory may seem unusual to readers, but, as I say, I was 'brought up' with all that, so those were familiar oddities, so to speak.

As regards Barthes's more gnomic moments – and there are quite a few – I was helped a little by learning, in my background reading, of his affection for the Littré dictionary. Fortunately, I have a friend here in Birmingham who owns an excellent edition from just the right period.

One of the quirkier things about this project has been recognizing certain usages and turns of phrase that I'm familiar with from Baudrillard. I suspect some of them embody a certain thinking about the signifier and its autonomy, but these are thoughts that perhaps belong to a different theoretical level. Baudrillard was, of course, one of Barthes's students at the École pratique des hautes études as it was then. On the rare occasions when we talked about Barthes, he was always very respectful of his memory. I think it was the text that became *Système des objets* which began life as contributions to Barthes's seminar.

Just to come back briefly to difficulties – and specifically the 'bliss' question – I'll confess that I wrestled with that for quite some time. I suppose it illustrates how coming to a writer after so many other translators have already rendered his major works into English is a very different task from that of consciously retranslating an author's major works on a radically new basis – something that's been done with Freud in French, for example. It would be wonderful to have the luxury of that sort of undertaking, but in reality, you're almost always translating in conditions that are not of your own making.

When you're working in a terminological context that's already been shaped in a certain way, you have to decide whether you have the confidence to strike out in some new directions or make compromises with the existing usage. Because I'm a bit of a latecomer on the Barthes scene, I've generally tried not to pose any unnecessary challenges to those who've had access to him only through the existing translations. That played a part in the 'bliss' decision. And, for example, when translating the text that was a sort of precursor to *S/Z*, it seemed better generally to follow the usage of the English translation of *S/Z* where possible, so that the Anglophone reader who wants to compare the two

– or to see how the one develops into the other – isn't faced with complications generated by 'Chinese whispers' in the translations.

NB: Barthes's style changes over time, and the five Seagull volumes range right across his career. With that in mind, did you work chronologically through the French texts?

CT: Not exactly, though I had a plan of campaign for background reading that involved quite a lot of the existing English translations of the main works and I did that reasonably systematically and in chronological order. With the exception of the Annette Lavers and Colin Smith translations of *Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*, I'd never read them before. I also read a lot of the best-known critical writing on Barthes, with particular emphasis on the seminars of the later years, which I didn't know so well. Otherwise, having 'lived with' the author through his various phases seemed to me to be sufficient, though that isn't to say that some of the shifts in Barthes's positions weren't a bit bewildering at the time – even such texts as *Le Plaisir du texte* or *Barthes par lui-même*, which I'm certain seemed much odder to me when they were first published than they do now. But it probably helps that in these five short volumes we're not dealing with much of the very late or posthumous material, which I suspect may make more challenging demands.

NB: You mentioned earlier that you developed relationships with Baudrillard and Gorz through translating their work. Did they, or any of the other figures whose writings you translated during their lifetimes, play an active role in the production of the English texts?

CT: Someone like Gorz, who was bilingual in French and German and had an English-born partner in Dorine/Doreen, was very clear about how he wanted his books to look in English. He favoured a pared-down, crisp, economical style and I tried to provide it. If there was a choice of alternative translations of quoted material, he would also invariably express a preference.

Baudrillard did a lot of translation at one time in his career (from German), so he was conscious of the issues. I spent a lot of time discussing translation questions with him – mostly by telephone. On some rare occasions I did work with him on last-minute changes that he was making to papers he was about to deliver in English at some event or other (a couple at the ICA spring to mind). Generally speaking, I'd

take out his gallicisms and he'd restore them, since, not being a fluent English speaker, he found it easier to deliver a highly latinate text than a more colloquially English one. I usually compromised over his changes on the day, but insisted on control of the later published version, though that experience probably influenced the way I thought about his English 'voice'.

I've always been happy to bring the original authors into the translation process where possible, if that's what they want. And with books composed largely of fragments, as some of Baudrillard's are, it would have been very difficult to work without the sort of supplementary contextual information that you can elicit from a living author. But as to authors playing an *active* part in producing the translated text, that would probably be overstating it – for those two writers or any others I've worked with.

NB: Roland Barthes clearly couldn't have played an active role in the production of the Seagull translations, and Richard Howard says somewhere that Barthes was never really interested anyway in checking how he'd been rendered in English, but did Seuil or someone associated with the estate have to approve the work before the volumes went to press?

CT: No, not in this case – at least as far as I know. When I translated the Sartre volumes for Seagull (this was *Situations* vols. I, III and IV, though Seagull's editors insisted on more enticing English titles), the text was reviewed quite closely by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre who is Sartre's adoptive daughter and, as I understand it, his literary executor. That was actually a very helpful process, in which she made some useful suggestions and was also rather complimentary and encouraging, but I've not had the benefit of any feedback of that kind on this project.

NB: At the time of this interview (October 2015), three of your new Barthes translations for Seagull Books have appeared, with two more to follow in 2016. Could you give a preview of coming attractions by saying a little about what will be in those two later collections?

CT: The next volume to appear should be the one on literary criticism. That has some early articles on 'classic' novelists like Hugo, Zola and Maupassant, and also on the French New Novel, all of which in my view make interesting reading, together with thoughts on other critics, including the sociologically inclined, such as Lucien Goldmann. There

are also occasional pieces on Sade and on Voltaire and Rousseau, as well as the text 'Masculine, Feminine, Neuter', which Barthes's French editor Éric Marty describes as the 'first outline' of *S/Z*.

The last volume deals with visual material, ranging from general discussions around the question of whether we're now living in an image-based civilization to studies of individual artists and film-makers. There are four articles on photography from the late '70s that will probably be of interest to those who've found Barthes's *Camera Lucida* stimulating.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris Turner (b. 1953) is a translator and writer living in Birmingham, UK. He has an MA in Modern Languages from the University of Cambridge and a D. Phil. in French Studies from the University of Sussex. His focus in recent years has been mainly on work for a major French think-tank and on developing the 'French List' of Seagull Publishers. He is a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the journal *Cultural Politics*.

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